Review of *Open World Empire: Race, Erotics, and the Global Rise of Video Games* by Christopher B. Patterson (New York University Press)

by Ian Sinnett |

ABSTRACT   In *Open World Empire: Race, Erotics, and the Global Rise of Video Games*, Christopher B. Patterson critically analyzes video games through the methodological framework of erotics. In doing so, he provides astute insights into the ways in which video games can work to challenge essentialized narratives and constructions of race while also fostering greater awareness and understanding of one's own place within the larger geopolitical systems of capitalism and empire. Through understanding video gamers as not simply passive receptors of ideology, but rather as active participants in the gameplay experience, he contends that video games create pleasure and other forms of affective engagement through erotic play. Through this erotic play, Patterson argues that "games enact playful protests against the power, identity, and order of information technology" (7).

KEYWORDS   technology, capitalism, race, video games, global, erotics, empire

Open World Empire: Race, Erotics, and the Global Rise of Video Games. By Christopher B. Patterson. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2020, 344 pp. (paperback). ISBN: 978-1-4798-9590-8. US List: $35.00

The critical study of video games has been a flourishing field for some time. While the array of research into video games has been varied and perceptive, much of it focuses on either the supposed totalizing negative effects of games or their universal liberating and educational potentials. However, Christopher B. Patterson's *Open World Empire: Race, Erotics, and the Global Rise of Video Games* takes an exciting and novel approach by exploring the ways in which video games function between these seemingly disparate poles by analyzing them through the lens of erotics.

Patterson's book is complex yet accessible, serious yet playful, and provides unique insight into how video games operate within the larger realm of global politics, the communities playing them, and the individual gamer. He demonstrates that although "games do not seem ideological . . . their very existence has been conditioned upon the spread of militarized technology, the exploitation of racial and gendered labor hierarchies... and the techno-utopian associations of the digital" (1). However, he also reveals how video

games can offer various ways of challenging hegemonic narratives and discourses. Through analyzing gaming as an erotic act of play, he claims that "games can open us to be something other than what we were told we were. Games can break us, can unravel our presumptions about the world, by making plain our desires, pleasures, and powers within it" (30).

Patterson presents the book in two parts, each consisting of three chapters, bookended by an "Introduction" and "Coda." The two parts, titled "Asiatic" and "Erotic," approach games through these respective frameworks. Furthermore, the format of the book mimics forms of video gameplay by engaging in what Patterson refers to as "loops" reminiscent of the concept of the gameplay loop. For instance, each chapter imitates patterns of gameplay by "ending with reflections on Asia as a construct within the world empire" (31), thus invoking an erotics of the text akin to the erotics of gameplay on which the book focuses.

In the introduction, Patterson discusses the historical and theoretical foundations of video game studies and emphasizes the linkages between information technologies and global capitalist imperialism, referring to IT companies as "corporate harbingers of empire" for which video games act as the "artistic expression" (1). He also outlines his methodologies by focusing on three key theorists: Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Concentrating on works from their "last decades," (18) Patterson explains how each scholar shifted their analytical foci from the discursive and ideological to the erotic and the body. He highlights how these theorists' analyses of erotics and the body allowed them to "put trust in the powers of erotics both as a self-liberation and as a means of questioning the wider contexts in which pleasure takes place, including the role that pleasure plays in critique itself" (21). Further, through his framing of erotics, he defines the concept of "the Asiatic," as "a style or form recognized as Asianish but that remains adaptable, fluid, and outside of the authentic/inauthentic binary" (27). This concept of the Asiatic plays a major role throughout the text and informs his analyses of the ways in which video games can challenge normative discourses and essentialized narratives.

Part 1 of the book, titled "Asiatic," analyzes games through this framework of the "Asiatic," and tracks how video games can challenge preconceived notions of identity and racial hierarchies. In chapter one, Patterson explores how the "Asiatic" appears in video games and, specifically, explores how "play-based forms of race" in certain video games (e.g. *Street Fighter*) challenge essentialized constructions of race. He argues that thinking about games as "Asiatic" allows for the "reimagin[ing] of racial boundaries and categories," which has "the potential . . . to revise meanings of race and to disrupt racial hierarchies" (41). In Chapter 2, Patterson continues this line of analysis by looking at the importance of authorship (or "auteurship") to analyze how the cultural background of the author or developer of a game can change its discursive meanings. By extension, he argues that "games can better speak to the complexities of imperial violence, where subversion and resistance often occur within the intricacies of vast and uncentered information networks" (79). In chapter three, Patterson explores how the erotics of digital roleplay (through role-playing games and chat room role-play) allow for the reconceptualization of power dynamics which can "make explicit the transnational power differentials that function as digital utopia's conditions of possibility" (115).

Part 2 of the book, titled "Erotics," shifts the analytical focus to, as Patterson puts it, analyzing how "playing erotically can itself upend forms of knowledge that go beyond merely exposing the faults of information technology but can show us something greater" (158). Chapter four focuses on bodily posture and the embodiment of the gaming experience. Patterson argues that various emotional and affective experiences in gameplay can create different bodily reactions, and in these bodily reactions the gamer takes different bodily postures. Through these postures, the gamer can come to new understandings of the self and of various sociopolitical conditions. In chapter five, Patterson explores the affective experience of the gameplay loop, largely through the open world first person shooter game series *Farcy*, to argue that certain types of gameplay loop can create a sense of pleasure, and in this pleasure, the learning and experiencing of politics can become pleasurable for the gamer and can "help us fathom how none of us are mere spectators" (231) to various political and militaristic atrocities. In the final chapter, Patterson investigates how the digital interactive experience of map viewing (through *Google Earth* and the computer game *Civilization 4*) can allow for a bird's-eye view of the geopolitical, and thus provoke further curiosity and subsequent investigation into the history that has contributed to these geographies for the viewer and gamer. This allows for one to be "prompted to discover the truth within these spaces—not the truth of the map but the truth of history, of empire, and of real still-living peoples" (270).

Overall, *Open World Empire* is an exciting and insightful text that offers a unique, critical analysis of video games, and should be of interest to anyone working in the areas of critical game studies, popular culture, American studies, Asian American studies, science and technology studies, queer theory, and erotics.

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Ian Sinnett is a PhD student in cultural studies at George Mason University. At GMU, his research has ranged from the ethnographic study of subcultural music scenes in Washington, DC to the critical analysis of video games. His primary research areas are popular culture and popular music, the politics of memory, affect theory, and critical video game studies. He holds an MA from Kansas State University, and a BA from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

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